

Section 1: Introduction

The farms and farmers of Ontario County are heirs to, and guardians of, an agricultural heritage spanning centuries: capable, engaged, and effective industry leaders in production, innovation, and stewardship. Their dedication and commitment to their vocation has continually placed Ontario County among New York State's leading producers of dairy, field crops, and other agricultural products. Throughout cycles of prosperity and economic downturn, they have kept hundreds of thousands of acres in production, providing food and fiber for innumerable people across the world. They have perhaps played a larger role than any others in the shaping of the local economy, environment, and culture.

In recognition of this heritage and the impact of agriculture on Ontario County as a whole, the Board of Supervisors adopted its first Agricultural Enhancement Plan in 2000. Over the course of 16 years, the successful implementation of that plan helped to facilitate the growth and development of agricultural businesses within the county. It also provided valuable direction for agricultural support agencies, and helped to educate local decision-makers and community members regarding the needs of the agricultural sector.

In 2014, the Ontario County Agricultural Enhancement Board initiated a process to update that plan, and applied for a Farmland Protection Planning grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. Their interest in updating the Agricultural Enhancement Plan was driven by a number of changes in both the county and the agricultural sector; since 2000, countywide development patterns have continued to evolve, as have the physical, operational, and economic needs of the county's farms. However, the underlying purpose of the original Agricultural Enhancement Plan remains as important in 2016 as in 2000 – to maintain and enhance the viability of farms and farm-related businesses in Ontario County.

1.1 Plan Development

A. Priority Issues Action Plan

In January of 2014, the Ontario County Agricultural Enhancement Board and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County drafted a “Priority Issues Action Plan” to guide the development of the AEP. The Priority Issues Action Plan identified key initiatives that the Board and CCE sought to advance through the NYSDAM Agricultural & Farmland Protection Planning Program grant. These initiatives, as well as a series of recommendations set forth within the Priority Issues plan, helped to frame subsequent discussions throughout the development of the AEP.

B. Focus group discussions

The Agricultural Enhancement Board organized a series of five focus group discussions in April and May of 2015 to solicit feedback relative to opportunities and issues specific to individual portions of the agricultural sector within the County. These discussions helped to identify constraints faced by farms and agricultural businesses, and to generate suggestions for policy decisions.

Each of the five focus group meetings were facilitated by project consultants, with assistance provided by County staff. The discussions were organized around five general focus areas:

- Dairy
- Livestock and field crops
- Fruit, vegetable, and horticultural production
- Niche markets
- Agribusiness and transportation

A summary of the focus group discussions is provided in **Appendix B**. Generally, four critical themes emerged across the groups that provided a basis for further discussion and analysis in the AEP:

- The concept of “local” agricultural markets varies greatly across agricultural businesses and sub-sectors;
- While the Finger Lakes region includes many critical “upstream” and “downstream” resources (i.e., suppliers and customers) for agricultural businesses, there are still several gaps that could be addressed to increase operational viability;
- Although municipal regulations and policies are not a primary concern for most agricultural businesses in the near term, they will still play a major role in the long-term viability of the county’s agricultural sector;
- There is widespread concern regarding the negative feedback loop between agricultural literacy and agricultural viability. As the general population has become more removed from agricultural production, their understanding of the needs of farms and farmers has diminished. This lack of understanding often contributes to land use conflicts with non-agricultural neighbors, which can lead

to increased expenses and/or abandoned farmland.

C. Public meetings

The first of two public informational meetings was held on April 20, 2016, at the Ontario County Safety Training Facility in the Town of Hopewell. Participants at the open house meeting were guided through a series of informational displays describing the purpose of the planning effort, existing conditions throughout the county's agricultural sector, draft goals, and an interactive exercise to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing Ontario County farms and farmers.

A second public informational meeting was held on February 26, 2018, at the Ontario County Safety Training Facility. A series of information stations related to the planning process and products were again on display, and project staff were available to discuss the effort with attendees. Feedback provided by members of the public was primarily directed toward the draft recommendations, and the draft was revised in light of this feedback.

D. Other public participation opportunities

At the outset of the AEP planning initiative, Ontario County created a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/OntarioCountyAEP) to connect with local farms and interested residents, share relevant news regarding the region's agricultural sector, and provide project updates to the public. This page also helped to distribute information about local farm-related events, such as the Maple Weekend, and news about funding opportunities. Information regarding the AEP update process was also posted on the Agricultural Enhancement Board page on the county's website (www.co.ontario.ny.us).

Project-related information was also made available to attendees at the annual Ag Appreciation Banquet (March 20, 2015) and Fun on the Farm event (September 26, 2015). Both of these events helped to spread the word about the county's efforts to engage farmers in the planning process, and educate the public about issues facing farm businesses.

E. Renewed vision for agriculture in Ontario County

In the spirit of this agricultural heritage, and with an eye toward the future, the farmers and farm business owners of Ontario County have established a renewed vision for the growth of agriculture in their community:

Vision Statement:

In the coming decade, Ontario County's agricultural sector will be recognized throughout the Northeast for its productivity, integration, diversity, innovation, and vibrancy.

1.2 Goals

Through the adoption and implementation of this Agricultural Enhancement Plan (AEP), Ontario County seeks to achieve the following seven goals in support of this vision:

1. Facilitate and support the viability of farms and farm-related businesses, and expand opportunities for the growth of new agricultural enterprises
2. Retain a critical mass of high quality, actively farmed agricultural lands
3. Foster a high degree of public awareness and appreciation for agriculture
4. Develop and maintain high quality physical infrastructure and institutional capacity to support the viability of farm businesses
5. Increase collaboration between farm businesses and regional institutions and agencies
6. Increase the adoption of sound energy, resource conservation and waste management practices
7. Develop and maintain a highly skilled agricultural workforce and safe work environment for agricultural operators and employees

1.3 Plan organization

- The “Existing Conditions” section describes the state of Ontario County’s agricultural sector – the agencies and other initiatives that support the sector, municipal regulations affecting farms and farming, and the environmental and economic “footprint” of the sector.
- The “Recommendations” section identifies implementation actions that Ontario County agencies and their partners can use to advance the goals established by this plan.
- This is followed by the “Identification of Priority Lands for Protection”, which identifies areas for future farmland protection efforts, as well as the methodology by which those lands were chosen.
- The plan’s Appendices provide additional detail with regard to the research and outreach that went into the development of this document, as well as additional resources for plan implementation.